AmigaMCCC News
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March 2005

Retro-Computing

You know how they say you can wait forever for a bus, and then three come at once. It seems news in the Amiga world is often the same way. To be fair, some of this news is left over from when I forgot to cover it in last month's newsletter, but we all must take what we can get.

As many who read my column may know, I've been on a bit of a "retro" video gaming kick for a while, and as a result I semi-occasionally pick up a British magazine called "Retro Gamer." (Remember British magazines from the good old days when the Amiga was still strong in Europe?) Their ninth issue had a nice article on the advent and history of the Amiga — nice because it was a little bit more objective than similar articles from Amiga mags and a bit more knowledgable than most from non-Amiga mags. I must admit I learned a little from the article. One could say that Atari spawned Amiga, much as they spawned companies like Activision and others, through lack of vision and below-par treatment of employees. Jay Miner, who designed microchips for the Atari 2600VCS and 400/800 computers, wanted to make a super-machine based on the Motorola 68000 CPU, but there was no interest at Atari at the time. (This was 1980, BTW.) It does shed a light on why Amigas seem to have more in common with early Atari computers than early Commodore computers.

The Amiga began to develop in the early eighties as a high-powered game machine, and backers balked at the idea that it might be expandable into a home computer. When the video game market caved-in on itself in 1983/4, while home computers motored on, the backers were suddenly a lot more interested in making a real computer out of it. Amiga was at financial near-death in 1984, but made a big showing (with the original "Boing" demo) at the Consumer Electronics Show to attract some new development capital. While Amiga courted the likes of Apple, Atari, Silicon Graphics, and Sony, Only Atari made an serious offer, loaning Amiga $500,000 until a buyout could be arranged. Amiga knew Atari was more interested in scavenging technologies than producing an Amiga machine, and an Atari memo that they were putting all their computer projects on hold didn't help. So they tried to find another buyer, eventually hooking Commodore, who paid back the Atari loan and scooped up Amiga for a more fair price than the one Atari kept lowering. Atari, under former Commodore boss Jack Tramiel (who left C= after disputes with Irving Gould — remember him!?) sued for breach of contract, claiming Amiga had no right to talk to anyone else while still in (seemingly pointless) negotiations with Atari. Oddly enough, Atari put out the ST, a suspiciously Amiga-ish machine slightly before Commodore.

Unfortunately, the article pretty much leaves the Amiga for dead after Commodore's bankruptcy in 1994, but considering it's primarily a gaming magazine, it's fair enough to say the Amiga was not a serious contender in the gaming world after that point. Perhaps once the PPC machines take off, we'll start seeing better games coverage, even if they are all SDL ports.

Combining the ideas of retro gaming and the late great(?) Commodore, I recently cheaply acquired one of the "C64 DTV 30-in-I TV game joysticks," and plan to bring it to the meeting. One thing special about this item is that, unlike many of the other plug-and-play TV games which feature recreations of old-timey gameplay and graphics on cheap off-the-shelf hardware, the C64DTV is, for all practical purposes, a real Commodore 64 computer miniaturized to fit into a joystick controller (created by the talented Jeri Ellsworth), running original Commodore 64 game code (with a few modifications to allow a few buttons to replace the functions previously reserved to a keyboard. All the games come from either Epyx or Hewson/Graftgold, presumably because that what could be licensed for use. There are already a few websites out there with information for modifying/hacking the stick to use a keyboard and disk drive, bringing it back to full home computer status, as well as accessing hidden content built into the device. While I wish the joystick control itself was a bit more responsive, and that a few more of the favorite 64 games from

my past were included, it's an amazing effort, and possibly the best TV game stick available from a hardware standpoint. As I said, I'll bring mine along to the meeting, so you can draw your own conclusions.

Back to the seemingly modern world. While Amiga One users wait patiently for the next pre-release update of Amiga 0S4, MorphOS has been on a roller-coaster ride of late. It all started with news that some of the programmers behind the MorphOS effort were stopping work because they were not properly paid by Genesi, effectively holding their little chunks of code for ransom. Some of the items in dispute included the kernel, Ambient — the "Workbench" of MorphOS — and MUI, which we all know as the GUI engine for a million Amiga programs. Bill Buck and Genesi tried to resolve things, but resources were too limited to give all what they want/need, and it was becoming increasingly obvious that non-payment was not the sole cause of problems, as MorphOS team members squabbled over their own personal visions and directions for their own code. Genesi decided to sever direct financial ties to MorphOS, and formed a tighter relationship with the Gentoo Linux association. For a short while it seemed apparent that MorphOS was all but dead, until... Perhaps it was the scare of Genesi's pragmatic attitude, or perhaps it was the support (and begging) of the Morph users out there, but one by one, things began to work themselves out. Conflict with MUI's programmer was resolved. Ambient was released to open source. Other options like the Scalos Workbench replacement resurfaced. Not every problem is solved, to be sure, but the overall situation is nowhere near as dire as it appeared earlier, and we still get new MorphOS software and updates. It's apparent the MorphOS team need to get past their immediate differences to make MorphOS a mature operating system, and do better still if it is to develop beyond the immediate. Perhaps it will happen — perhaps not. But it should, and will if the spirit that brought the original Amiga into existence has anything to say about it. (It's doing it for OS4 too. Don't worry folks — there's enough spirit to go around.)

...Eric Schwartz
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AmigaMCCC News

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March Calendar

March 14 — Amiga By-The-Loop Chapter
7:00 pm — Grand Prairie Public Library
901 Conover Drive, Grand Prairie

March 14 — MCCC Board of Director's Meeting
Approx. 9:30 pm — Location TBD

March 26 — Newsletter Deadline — 7:00 am